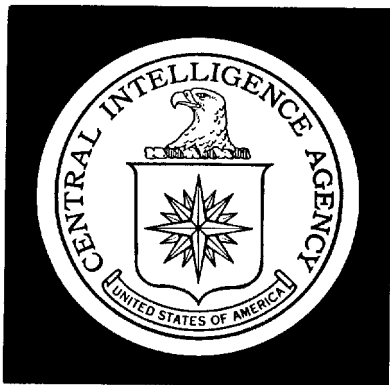


Secret

25X1



DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Afghanistan: King Zahir's Experiment in Democracy

Secret

No. 43

31 October 1969

No. 0394/69A

25X1

Approved For Release 2006/04/13 : CIA-RDP79-00927A007400040002-7

Approved For Release 2006/04/13 : CIA-RDP79-00927A007400040002-7

SECRET

AFGHANISTAN: KING ZAHIR'S EXPERIMENT IN DEMOCRACY

King Zahir's bold "experiment in democracy" has just passed another political milestone with the completion of Afghanistan's second parliamentary election under the 1964 constitution. The first few years of the experiment, were designed to give an authoritarian tribal society a degree of Western-style parliamentary government. They were turbulent years for the country, which, nevertheless, has managed to maintain a remarkable degree of stability. The cautious modernization effort is generating obvious strains, particularly in urban areas, but it has not seriously damaged the social fabric of this tradition-bound country.

Although the underpinnings of a new political system have been established, a workable balance between executive leadership, parliamentary action, royal guidance, and popular participation has not yet been struck. Achieving this balance and resolving—within a democratic framework—the conflict between Afghanistan's conservative and progressive forces are the primary challenges facing the nation's new leadership. Despite the discouragingly slow pace of social change and barely perceptible economic and political progress thus far, the King apparently remains sincerely committed to the eventual realization of the liberal reform program which he set in motion six years ago.



THE "EXPERIMENT" IN CRISIS

In the last two years, public confidence in the experiment has begun to wane. The extraordinary tasks of effectively running a new political system and dealing with massive socioeconomic problems have tended to overwhelm the country's new and essentially untried leaders. Faced with bewildering new challenges of civil unrest created by the slow erosion of traditional ties and disciplines, the government of Prime Minister Etemadi has been afflicted with a disturbing immobilism. The resulting leadership

void, combined with the sluggishness and unmanageability of parliament, has contributed to economic and social stagnation. Some educated citizens, particularly conservatives who favor return to a more autocratic form of government, are said to be seriously questioning Afghanistan's readiness for even a limited form of democracy. Among the skeptics are many of the most influential people in the country, including important members of the royal family, educated technocrats whose prerogatives are challenged by the experiment, and other established interests.

SECRET

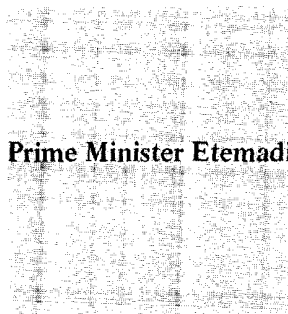
Discontent with the experiment, however, although it affects an important segment of Afghans, is still centered in a tiny portion of the population. The vast majority of Afghans care little who occupies the seat of power in Kabul. The country remains overwhelmingly illiterate—over 90 percent—and rural; 90 percent of the people are tied to the land or to their flocks. Unconcerned about the political machinations and intrigues of Kabul, the provincial tribes and peasantry are content with their time-honored customs and want only to be left alone. Having been spared the problems of overpopulation, hunger, and abject poverty prevalent in some other South Asian countries, most Afghans feel no sense of urgency about industrialization or reform. Political awareness is limited almost entirely to a very few urban residents who have received some modern education. The tendency of the current national leaders to proceed cautiously and simply let things work themselves out naturally—no matter how long and disorganized a procedure this might be—somehow seems appropriate for this remote, tradition-oriented kingdom.

THE KING

King Zahir's role in Afghanistan has changed dramatically since he assumed the throne at the age of 19 in 1933, following the assassination of his father. For years, Zahir and the Afghan Government were dominated by the King's three uncles. In 1953, the King's cousin and brother-in-law, the authoritarian Mohammad Daud, became prime minister and governed for the next decade, using strong-arm tactics that won him both the respect and the fear of the population. In the early 1960s, King Zahir became increasingly aware of the liberal political movements that had been sweeping the Middle East since World War II. In an effort to prevent such a development from engulfing his own country and to halt the



King Zahir



Prime Minister Etemadi



increasingly anti-Pakistan and pro-Soviet trend of Afghanistan's foreign policy, Zahir forced the resignation of Daud and launched his "experiment in democracy." He appointed for the first time a commoner Mohammad Yusuf, as prime minister, and promoted the drafting of a new constitution that established a parliamentary government and prohibited members of the royal family from holding high government offices. The country's first elections under the new constitution were held in September 1965, and Mohammad Hashim Maiwandwal was appointed to replace Yusuf. After two controversial years in office, Maiwandwal resigned, ostensibly for health reasons, and was replaced by Nur Ahmad Etemadi, who has since held the office.

Although the King seems to be staunchly behind the reform program, he has not yet succeeded in defining a proper role for himself in the new system. He has kept himself well informed on internal developments, but has rarely asserted

SECRET

his will openly or even behind the scenes. On the other hand, his ambivalence about sharing political power has perpetuated the palace as the locus of political strength and favor. He has kept a tight rein on the defense establishment. He has failed to sign enabling legislation for political parties and municipal elections, thereby thwarting the development of institutions designed to prepare men for political leadership. The King's decisions on these matters have been regarded by some observers as a royal reluctance to permit the establishment of alternative bases of power. It seems more likely, however, that King Zahir is under severe pressure from powerful reactionary elements to abrogate the experiment altogether and has been searching for some way to make the new system acceptable to all Afghans and to bring it safely through this trial period.

THE ETEMADI GOVERNMENT

King Zahir's appointment of Etemadi as prime minister was generally regarded as a royal decision to slow the pace of the experiment in democracy and cool political tempers aroused by Etemadi's predecessor, the controversial Maiwandwal. Maiwandwal had given parliament short shrift, making little effort to develop a workable and equitable relationship between the two branches of government. Furthermore, his attempt to establish an independent political base had threatened established interests

In Etemadi, the King found a man of acknowledged integrity and intelligence but questionable drive and decision-making ability. Not unexpectedly, Etemadi's term of office has been characterized by vacillating and ineffective leadership. Viewed in perspective, this low-keyed approach certainly had a large measure of royal

approval. Democratization and decentralization of power under the experiment have not altered the fact that in Afghanistan the King remains the final and pre-eminent source of power. If King Zahir had disapproved of Etemadi's performance, he could have replaced him. In typical fashion, King Zahir preferred to let the government muddle along rather than step into the political fray and provide a strong guiding hand.

It should be noted, however, that the Etemadi government has made some positive contributions to the new political system. The prime minister did not rock the boat or challenge established interests as Maiwandwal had. Furthermore, he succeeded in improving relations between the government and parliament. His genuine effort to consult rather than bypass the legislature, however, frequently was carried to extremes. His deference to the inexperienced deputies all too often resulted in a paralysis of the political process and a shelving of important economic development plans. These problems worried Kabul's foreign advisers far more than they disturbed the Afghans themselves.



Outgoing Parliament in Joint Session

SECRET

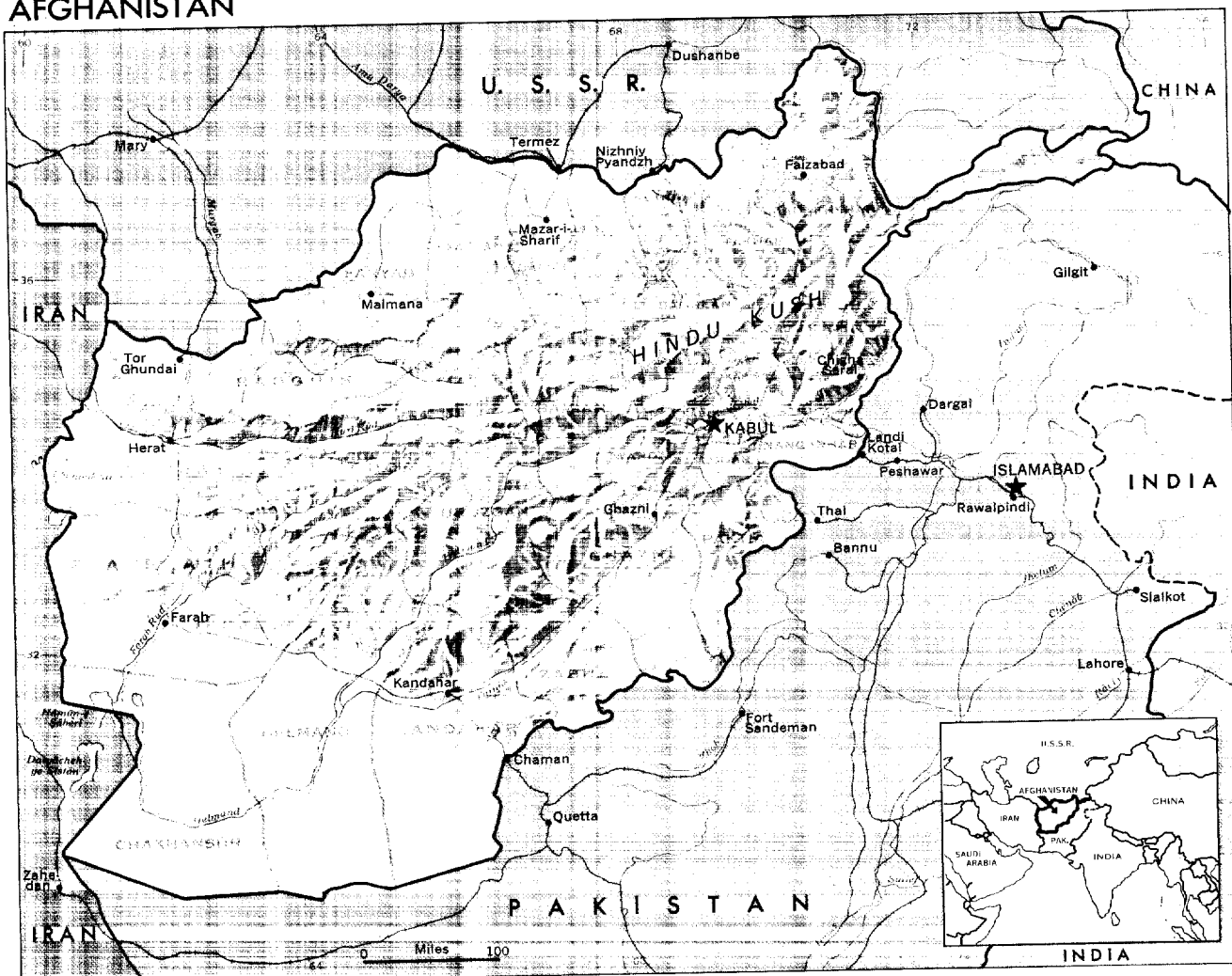
25X1

PARLIAMENT

Despite its extremely poor legislative record, the Afghan Parliament undeniably has established its place in the political order as an institution with considerable influence. Increasingly conscious of their representative function, the deputies began to espouse the causes of students and other constituents and make the Lower

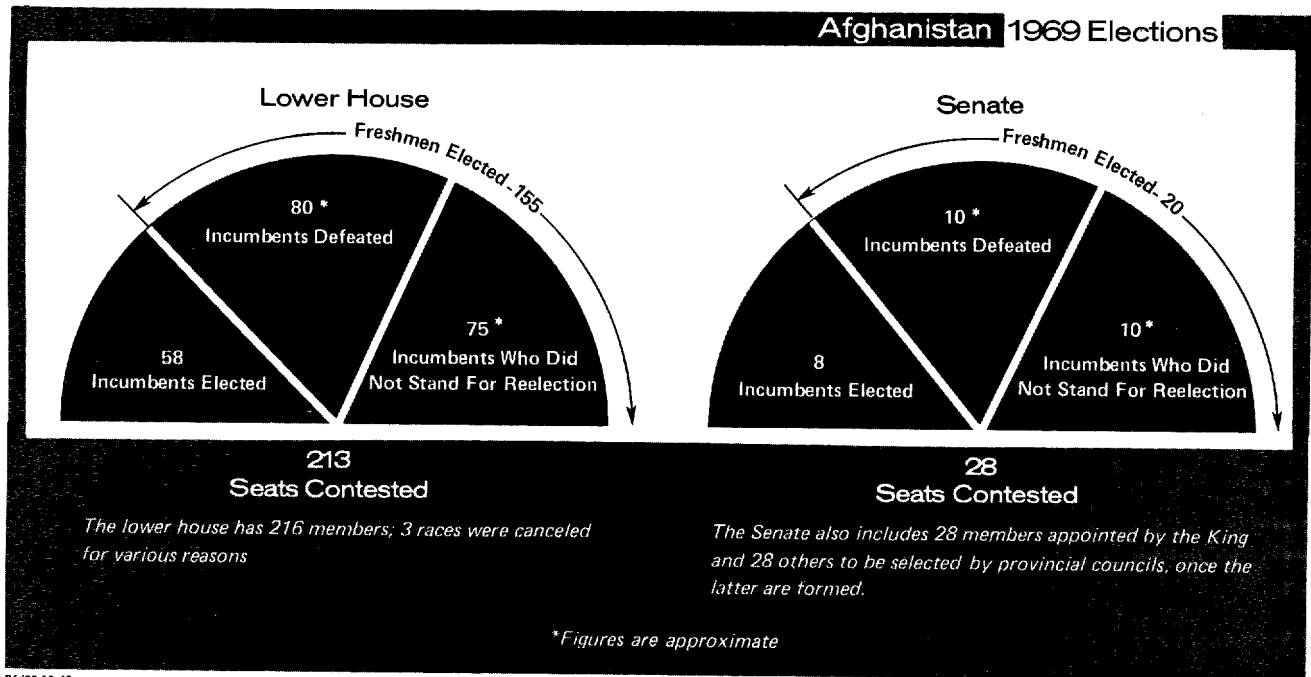
House a true forum for the expression of public opinion. Parliament also served quite effectively as an investigative body, rooting out corruption and exposing wrong-doing among high government officials; one investigation forced the resignation of a cabinet member. In addition, the deputies summoned cabinet ministers before the Lower House to undergo strenuous questioning.

AFGHANISTAN



96484 10-69

SECRET



96493 10-69

Nevertheless, the Afghan Parliament has been ineffective as a legislative body. Although the deputies have gained some experience and understanding of complex governing problems during the past four years, there has been almost no forward movement on urgent economic and social programs. Parochialism and tribal ties have continued to dominate parliament, with most deputies concerned only about those issues which directly affect their own interests.

25X1

Nor have the confused and disorderly internal proceedings of parliament shown any signs of improving. Most of the parliamentary debates are meaningless, with every deputy having his say on each issue, according to age-old tribal custom. The absence of legal political parties contributes to this chaos. Parties could provide the basis for internal parliamentary organization and rationalization of procedures. Party spokesmen could

speak for their supporters on the issues, thus reducing debate and stepping up the current snail's pace of activity. Thus far, the King has been unwilling to sign into law the political parties bill passed by parliament in May 1968.

With these elections over and the next one four years away, King Zahir may now be ready to sign such legislation, in the belief that political groups of all colorations will have enough time to establish and organize themselves before the next electoral campaign.

King Zahir must take considerable responsibility for inaction on legislative as well as executive matters. Parliament, which has considered it a matter of pride not to take orders

SECRET

from the prime minister and his cabinet, has consistently shown itself ready to move with alacrity when royal interest was indicated. In the absence of such interest, very few pieces of significant legislation have been passed, and both houses have recessed each year, leaving a full agenda of unfinished business.

INCREASING CIVIL UNREST

Civil unrest also has come into its own during Etemadi's term of office as the wave of global student dissent reached the remote foothills of the Hindu Kush. Student protests are not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan, having been a major factor in the toppling of the Yusuf government in 1965. The permissiveness of the Etemadi government, however, enabled student dissidents to gain experience in demonstrating and to establish themselves as an important political factor. They not only took their academic and political grievances to the streets, but also succeeded in establishing an alliance with parliamentary deputies and eventually even a coalition with discontented faculty members.

During the widespread demonstrations in the spring of 1968, there were, for the first time, definite indications of central guidance and coordination—probably leftist—behind student and labor protests. The demands and behavior of the demonstrators were strikingly similar throughout the country. The protests, which erupted in a substantial number of Afghanistan's provinces, succeeded largely because of the government's delayed and indecisive response. In September 1968, after nearly five months of periodic student demonstrations, the King issued new universities and education decrees, which strengthened government control over educational institutions and severely restricted student political activities. Royal decrees have the force of law during parliamentary adjournments but must be submitted for

legislative approval within 30 days after parliament reconvenes. Students scored a resounding success when parliament rejected the two laws in November.

Laborers were less successful, because the police moved in more forcefully to put down their strikes and protests. The few concessions that the government promised the industrial workers—a small and quite inarticulate element of Afghan society—have not been made good.

The Etemadi government's inept handling of the 1968 civil unrest caused serious concern among educated Afghans, and King Zahir reportedly came under considerable pressure from members of the establishment in Kabul to adopt a harder line against demonstrations. Finally, in June 1969 after another series of student protests, Etemadi made a hard-hitting speech, emphasizing the government's intention to take a firm stand in dealing with protests and dissidents. The regime seems to have followed up Etemadi's speech with action. All students registering at Kabul University for this year's sessions are reportedly being required to sign pledges of good behavior. Similar promises were allegedly also extracted from secondary school students. The government hopes, in this way, to eliminate troublemakers and separate protest instigators from potential supporters and recruits.

The government's new policy, however, simply puts in suspension the real grievances of students and workers at a time when dissatisfaction within these elements of society is growing. Students are increasingly demanding the right not only to an education at government expense but also to a job following graduation. The government will not be able to absorb this burgeoning labor supply indefinitely, and the sluggish private sector is not growing fast enough to take up the slack. Many graduates may eventually swell the

SECRET

discontented ranks of the educated unemployed. In addition, the government appears to be in no hurry to pass legislation to improve the sorry lot of the laborers, whose numbers will grow as the nation slowly industrializes.

GREATER FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

The permissiveness of the Etemadi regime also encouraged the growth of a so-called independent press. Independent newspapers in Afghanistan are really less than the term implies because the government owns all of the country's printing facilities. Nevertheless, the number of independently managed journals—most are political tracts—increased from two when Etemadi assumed office to more than ten in the fall of 1969. When Etemadi first took over only those articles regarded by the government as “calls to revolution” were considered grounds for suspension of a newspaper's publishing rights. The prime minister's get-tough speech of June 1969 and the approach of the fall elections, however, signaled a government crack-down on the press and other critics. Several papers were suspended indefinitely and legal action was taken against others. Nevertheless, on balance, the newspaper field has grown, and the government will probably continue to allow limited freedom of the press, possibly on the assumption that newspapers provide a useful outlet for the expression of grievances that might otherwise take a more violent turn.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Although Afghan political parties have not yet received legal sanction, a number of political groupings have developed. These cover the entire range of the political spectrum, but the most easily identifiable and by far the best organized are the extreme left and the far right. The numerous amorphous groups which fall in

between typically are made up of small numbers of supporters of particular personalities—such as ex-Prime Minister Maiwandwal or socialist Mohammad Siddiq Farhang—whose ideas and prestige give the groups their character. Although these so-called parties are gaining in importance, party membership still encompasses only a very small minority of politically aware and active Afghans. Parliament has provided an opportunity for increased party activity. Usually, however, factors other than party affiliation have determined final votes on bills before the assembly.

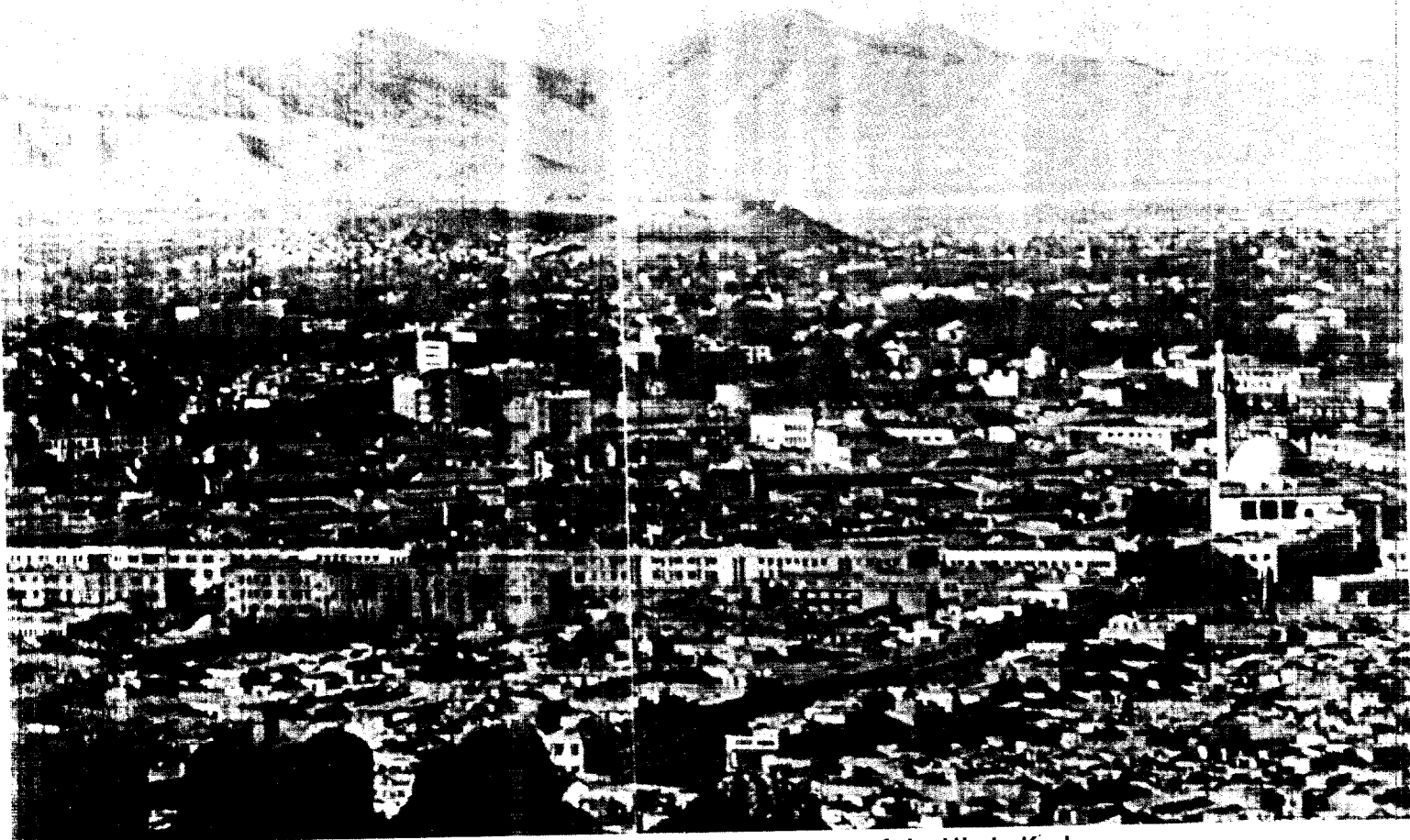
Analysis of the elections of August and September of this year indicates that party and ideology played a very small role in most races. The crucial elements were family and tribal connections as well as financial resources. Although voting in the cities was generally light, the rural turnout was heavier than in 1965 because provincial leaders made great efforts to get out the vote for their candidates, most of whom had no party ties. The political party line-up for the new parliament gives the avowed pro-Communists only two seats, leaving the far left, if anything, weaker than in the previous legislature. The strongest party will probably be a conservative-royalist group, which, however, is not expected to be subject to party discipline.

OUTLOOK

The prospects for impressive legislative action from the new parliament are not encouraging. The attitudes and backgrounds of the newly elected deputies are similar to those which predominated in the last parliament. Most of the deputies—who are primarily village, tribal, and religious elders—have little education and hold parochial views. In fact, provincialism and conservatism may be even more pronounced in this parliament than in the last.

SECRET

SECRET



Kabul, Capital of Afghanistan, in the Shadow of the Hindu Kush

Local leaders, who ignored the 1965 elections, were deeply involved in this year's campaign. Having realized the potential power of parliament, they campaigned actively for conservative—even reactionary—candidates. Many of the more educated and enlightened candidates had to suppress moderate or progressive views during the campaign. Some were forced to drop out of the race entirely, and many who completed the campaign were defeated. For whatever reason, the government apparently did not intervene on behalf of liberal, educated candidates as it had in 1965. A surprisingly large number of incumbents—who would have been able to guide freshmen members of the new parliament—were also

defeated. These developments appear to be primarily the result of the light voter turnout in the cities and apathy among educated Afghans who have openly expressed disillusionment with the experiment, dissatisfaction with the outgoing parliament, and disinterest in the elections. There appears to be some indication, also, that registration regulations were misunderstood; many people discovered on election day that they were ineligible to vote.

25X1

SECRET

SECRET

The new parliament, therefore, may be even less inclined to pass reform legislation than was the last. Its members are likely to become bogged down with economic and social programs far beyond their comprehension. The Lower House seems headed for organizational problems as well, since its able and highly respected president, Abdul Zahir, chose not to stand for re-election. There appears to be no one of his stature in the new body. Zahir was the force which, for four years, lent some semblance of order and sanity to the chaotic procedures of the Lower House.

The Afghan Parliament will continue to be a malleable entity, however, and its accomplishments will depend not only on its own initiative and enlightenment, but also on the nature and degree of executive leadership and royal direction. Most deputies remain fiercely loyal to the King, and they will be strongly influenced by his opinions and desires, if he sees fit to make these known.

25X1

King Zahir has again asked Etemadi to form a government, possibly because there is simply no one else willing or able to take over. An influx of new ideas and leadership from the executive branch, therefore, is unlikely. Etemadi does not seem to be any more enthusiastic about continuing his prime ministerial duties than he was about assuming them in the first place.

25X1

Forming a government and obtaining a vote of confidence from parliament will probably take several weeks. Some ministers of the last government are likely to be retained, but the over-all make-up of the cabinet is, at present, still a matter of speculation.

In any case, no great political, social, or economic changes are likely in Afghanistan for the next several years. The experiment will probably continue to plod along much as it has in recent years. Although students—and perhaps workers—may protest periodically, they do not present any real threat to the ruling powers. The incipient leftist movement has little numerical strength, and the government is prepared to muzzle extremists, as indicated by the arrest of several outspoken leftists during the recent elections and the indefinite suspension of certain extremist journals.

The threat from the political right is more real, particularly in view of the basic conservative bias of the Afghan population. Certain influential members of the royal family and other powerful established interests will continue to press the King to abrogate the experiment and resume complete power, especially if dissidents again take to the streets.

The King is apparently still convinced that the experiment is a worthwhile and necessary effort. Although he is not willing to push the reform movement any faster than his people find acceptable, he is indeed opposed to any reversion to autocracy. He would probably terminate the reform movement only if he considered it a threat to the national interest or to his own position. The King retains the vital support of the army, which has established unquestioned supremacy over occasionally recalcitrant tribes.

Should 55-year-old King Zahir be removed from the scene, however, the prospects for continuation of the experiment appear far less bright. None of his potential successors possesses both his governing capabilities and his commitment to reform. Although provincial leaders now have increased their stake in the continuance of parliament, the legislature and the other inchoate democratic institutions are almost certainly not yet capable of surviving without the royal blessing.

25X1

SECRET

Approved For Release 2006/04/13 : CIA-RDP79-00927A007400040002-7
Secret

Secret

Approved For Release 2006/04/13 : CIA-RDP79-00927A007400040002-7